

February 2018

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Recommended Citation

Douglas, Alicia (2018) "Walking the Crossroads of Campus and Community at Rockhurst," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 53 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol53/iss1/11>



Walking the Crossroads of Campus and Community at Rockhurst

By Alicia Douglas



During the development of Rockhurst University's campus master plan a few years ago, we learned we were considered an "introverted campus." It seems like a strange thought – introversion is a concept we usually apply to people, not to university campuses. But reflecting on that designation, it becomes abundantly clear how being introverted has guided relationships with our community members, partners, and stakeholders.

Rockhurst University sits in a social and geographic crossroads, an intersection of lifestyles, economic realities, lived experiences, types of housing stock, and business and institutional endeavors. Our university is one of the major institutions that serves as a community anchor to a neighbor-

hood that has been in transition for the past few decades. The neighborhood has struggled with aging housing stock. It has survived racist blockbusting tactics and white flight by creating the 49/63 Neighborhood Coalition made up of resident volunteers. That coalition stood up and cleaned house – literally – when the neighborhood became infested with drug houses. As those changes were happening, Rockhurst remained anchored and attentive. Rockhurst is blessed to be in Kansas City, a place that nurtures volunteerism and grassroots community activism so residents can tackle social justice issues on the home front. This culture of service also runs through the veins of Rockhurst itself.



Rockhurst University
Community Center.

Let us walk down a different direction of our crossroads.

We have a beautiful 55-acre campus in the urban center of Kansas City. We have a very active neighborhood coalition and a good relationship with the Kansas City Police Department. Minutes from us there are neighborhoods suffering from random acts of gun violence. Rockhurst, the neighborhood coalition, and the Southtown Council, our business association, are working together to regularly communicate with our patrol division about how our residents and institutions can better work together to make our neighborhoods safer. In addition, we continue conversations about what community policing means and how that translates onto the university campus with university security and police. What can we do to help bridge the gap and convene opportunities for positive interactions with police?

Being that introverted campus, it is natural for us to look inward; let us stop at the center of the intersection for a moment. Our university has intentionally convened discussions about diversity and inclusion for all members of our university community for the past few years. Meanwhile, the NAACP has issued a travel advisory for people of color passing through our state, Missouri, to be mindful of their safety and surroundings. Just across the state line in Kansas, a man was recently killed in a hate crime that attracted national attention. How do we help anyone visiting our city and our university understand that we at

The neighborhood coalition sometimes finds it necessary to challenge the university as a way of protecting the community. Plans for building construction or issues of student behavior can interfere with what long-term residents consider the natural order of things. Reflecting on our relationship-building experiences, we have learned that neighbors like to know what's going on. New construction without announcement, discussion, or community input causes anxiety and uncertainty. What will happen to their homes, property values, to the neighborhood in general?

Tensions can rise and communication gets tougher when dealing with student behavior issues. This is tough when there are repeat offenses of litter or loud parties that

go into the wee hours of the night next door to folks who have to go to work in the morning or have young children to put to sleep. The current group of students may learn the appropriate norms and behaviors for the neighborhood, but then there is a repeat cycle with each new class. How can we work together to help the students and neighbors find peaceful reconciliation? The university has chosen to step outside its cultural communication habitat and adapt new styles of communicating with neighbors. By creating the Rockhurst University Neighborhood Committee, which includes neighborhood leaders and university representatives, we can address concerns of our neighbors face-to-face and work alongside them to make our community better for everyone.



The campus bell tower. Photos courtesy of Rockhurst University.

Rockhurst have intentionally created an inclusive place for them? How do we work united with our community to demonstrate that our campus culture is one of peace, love, dignity, and inclusion? What can we do to share within our community and our surrounding community that we hold dear the Jesuit values and tradition that make Rockhurst special – that have held us accountable for being that community anchor for more than a century?

Building and maintaining trusting relationships between Rockhurst and the Coalition is imperative. Convening the RU Neighborhood Committee has provided opportunities to sit down and talk about our shared goals and concerns in an environment of trust and honesty. The committee worked to create a strategic plan to address shared community goals. Coming together in this way transitioned our relationship from contentious to trusting, even when faced with tragedy. When a local high school student was murdered while walking home near our campus, our community pulled together to grieve and to inspire hope; we held a vigil, developed back-to-school events, and continue to host an annual student-led neighborhood 5K run/walk to support a

scholarship fund in his memory. Humanizing each other and keeping open lines of communication is our best way of keeping our neighborhood relationships moving in a positive direction.

Being an introverted campus does not mean we accept whatever fate comes our way. It means we contemplate and act accordingly after giving the conversation the time it needs. We account for the lives that intersect in the crossroads: the ebullient hope of new students and professionals, reserved wisdom of long-term residents, cultivation of young families, struggles and triumphs of new businesses, and folks getting back on their feet. Reflecting on the words of our university president, our place is “to make God’s good world better.”

Alicia Douglas is director of community relations and outreach at Rockhurst University and has been with the university since 1999. She directs the Rockhurst University Community Center, facilitates the university’s Neighborhood Committee, and co-facilitates campuswide community service projects. She enjoys engaging in civic leadership activities in Kansas City.